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Museums

Historical Instrument Section

The Mystery of the Missing Tuba

Adolphe Sax is credited with bringing order to the diverse sprawl of intermediate-bore brasswinds by inventing the saxhorns as a "homogenous family" of instruments. In fact, the saxhorns form two distinct families, the narrow-bore (sur-aigu, soprano, contralto, tenor and baritone) and the wide-bore (bass, contrabasses):

Saxhorn sur-aigu	2-ft C or 2 1/4 ft B-flat
Saxhorn soprano	3-ft F or 3 3/4 ft E-flat
Saxhorn contralto	4-ft C or 4 1/2 ft B-flat
Saxhorn ténor	6-ft F or 6 1/2 ft E-flat
Saxhorn baryton	8-ft C or 9-ft B-flat
Saxhorn basse	8-ft C or 9-ft B-flat
Saxhorn contrebasse	12-ft F or 13-ft E-flat
Saxhorn contrebasse	16-ft C or 18-ft B-flat

The baritone and the bass are the same pitch, distinguished only by bore calibre.

Of these, the tenor and baritone saxhorns are currently in use with these names, and the bass and contrabasses are in use but known as euphonium and tubas. Looking at surviving museum instruments, there are numerous examples of most of these, though the very smallest is rare. There are also small instruments of wide bore profile, known as flugelhorns.

The mystery is the lack of a wide-bore instrument at 6-ft F or 6 1/2-ft E-flat tenor pitch. Sax and other makers such as Cervený must surely have experimented with these, and rejected them for some reason. It is significant that this gap occurs at a medium-sized tube length, with successful family members above and below. The very highest and lowest members of any family of instruments are always of doubtful viability for a variety of reasons, but to have a gap in the middle is unusual!

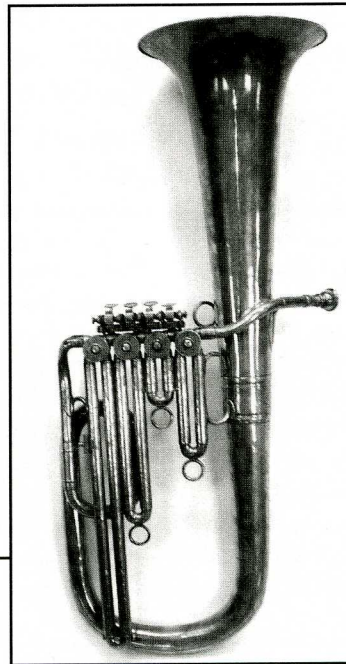
One could argue that the need for distinct voices in the brasswind of this tessitura was satisfied by the ready availability of tenor saxhorns and french horns. However, tenor and baritone saxhorns are perceived as rather weak instruments. As a solo voice, the bass saxhorn (or

euphonium) has always been preferred to the baritone. Why did the wide-bore tenor not survive amongst the fittest?

Recent studies in the museum collection of Boosey & Hawkes have identified what may be the sole survivor of this extinct species. It is an instrument of tenor horn size but with a much wider bore profile: the bore at the valves is

13.2mm (the usual tenor saxhorn bore is c 11.5mm at the valves). It was made by Henry Distin in London, circa 1860. The Distin family were at one time agents

Instrument in 6 1/2 ft E-flat by Henry Distin, circa 1860 (Museum of Boosey & Hawkes)



for Sax in Britain, but lost the agency when they started making their own instruments. From this time, they ceased using the word "saxhorn" in their advertising materials. The factory records of Henry Distin do not survive, but from 1868 (when Henry Distin's business was bought by Boosey & Co) complete records of all instruments from this

factory survive.

Boosey operated this business for six years as Distin & Co before stamping their own name and numbers on instruments. These archival records show that in the period from June 1868 to 1917, fourteen instruments of a kind described as "E-flat Tenor Euphonium" were made (see Table 1 on next page).

None of these fourteen is known to survive – unless one of our readers out there is harbouring one. Could they have

been a comparable model to the earlier Henry Distin instrument in the Boosey & Hawkes museum collection? At present we do not know if the "Tenor Euphonium" was invented by Distin or copied from one of Adolphe Sax's designs. If the latter, we do not know what Sax called this model but, if it had been some variety of "saxhorn," then Distin would certainly have found a different name for his copy.

As a museum object, there was no interest in the Distin tenor euphonium until recently when it was measured and found to be of unusually wide bore profile for a tenor horn (its catalogue description). It may be that many further museum instruments are not recognised for what they truly are.

